

# Descriptions of Old Norse Conflict in Victorian Literature

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# Introduction

- Victorian reception of Old Norse themes, “Old Northernism”
- links between Victorian perception of Old Norse culture and Victorian views of conflict and violence
- portrayal of Old Norse conflict in Victorian literature
- general trends / tendencies, specifics, and implications

# Andrew Wawn, *The Vikings and the Victorians* (2000)

In many ways, **the Victorians invented the Vikings**. The word itself [...] is not recorded in OED until just thirty years before the young Princess Victoria's coronation [...]. Yet, within fifty years, the word 'Viking' was to be found on dozens of title-pages – of poems, plays, pious fables, parodies, paraphrased sagas, prize essays, published lectures, papers in encyclopaedias. These were works written for all conditions of men, some conditions of women, and quite a few conditions of children. [...]

In archeology enthusiastic provincial antiquarians began to dig up and dust off Britain's Viking past [...]. Eager eyes spotted Odinic spears and Thunoric hammers in improbable locations [...] and the long-neglected Viking-age voices of local dialect and place-names were heeded again. [...] We also meet [in saga translations from this time] well-kempt heroes bearing an uncanny resemblance to Prince Albert [...]. (p. 3-5)

**“tension between scholarly probity [integrity] and cheerful populism”** (p. 5)

# Andrew Wawn, “The Viking Revival” (2011)

There were **claims that Victoria was descended from Óðinn**; that the entire Hanoverian royal family was related to Ragnarr Hairy-Breeches, a mighty Viking chief; and that King Haraldr Bluetooth was an ancestor of the Danish-born Princess of Wales. The Queen's principal physician, Sir Henry Holland, was a trail-blazing Iceland explorer, and under his influence **a native Icelandic scholar was received at court, where he recited an eddic-style Icelandic poem**. The poet claimed it was the first such performance by an Icelandic 'skald' since Gunnlaugr Wormtongue visited King Æthelred the Unready in the 11th century.



# The Victorians and “Old Northernism”

- Victorian era: 1837 – 1901
- fascination with ON culture – reflected in extraordinary popularity of ON themes in literature
- scholarly research – textbooks, dictionaries (Cleasby & Vigfusson 1874), translations (Morris & Magnusson, Saga Library)
- studies on mythological and religious themes
- literature - poetry, prose, drama (for men, women and children)
- applied arts (Morris and Burne-Jones – Vinland mansion, Newport, Rhode Island, USA)







# “Old Northernism” and the British Empire

- imperialism, expansion, colonialism, exploitation, power
- discovery, exploration, new opportunities, settlement, wealth
- national narrative – Vikings/Norsemen presented as the nation’s bold, powerful forebears – foundations for British nationhood, role models for the youth
- strong contradiction with views of Vikings in earlier centuries (“a most vile people”)
- Old Northernism: a revitalization/redemption process through exaggeration & elevation of specific qualities and omission of others

“[T]here is perhaps more of Norse blood in your veins than you wot [knew] of, reader, whether you be English or Scotch [...]. [...] **[M]uch of what is good and true in our laws and social customs, much of what is manly and vigorous in the British Constitution, and much of our intense love of freedom and fair play, is due to the pith, pluck, enterprise, and sense of justice that dwelt in the breasts of the rugged old sea-kings of Norway!**”

(R. M. Ballantyne, *Erling the Bold*, 1869)

# “Old Northernism” and the Victorian Society

- period of rapid change and progress; industrialization, innovation, expansion, growth
- uncertainty, search for stability and roots (narrative basis for past and future)

“[The Vikings] were like England in the nineteenth century [...]. They were **foremost in the race of civilisation and progress**; well started before all the rest had thought of running.”

(George Webbe Dasent, “England and Norway in the Eleventh Century,” *North British Review*, 1865)





# Victorian Views of Conflict

- between 1814 and 1914 – only one conflict against European power (Crimean War against Russia, 1854-56)
- increasing number of military campaigns overseas (India, Africa) – risk of Indigenous rebellion/unrest
- broader society distanced from the army (Royal Navy seen as more significant - “ruling the waves”); unfavourable view of ordinary soldiers
- celebration of military exploits in popular culture; romanticization of war
- late Victorian children’s fiction: war as an exciting adventure, a spectacle
- Victorian society (esp. in cities): strong concern about crime – police, prisons, detectives
- idea of separate “criminal class”/“criminal race” vs. law-abiding citizens

# Victorian Views of Conflict

- notable discrepancy between the Victorians' perception of conflict on “home soil” vs. “somewhere else”
- general tendency to glorify and idealize conflict the farther away it takes place (whether spatially or temporally)
- distance, whether in space or in time, allows society and culture to embellish and reshape the facts to form a desirable, powerful narrative
- in Victorian era, the narrative directed primarily towards the inevitability of British victory and glory
- the Vikings: a means to secure the narrative of Britain's “glorious military past”

# Old Norse Conflict in Victorian Literature

- ON culture and stories – perfect source for the narrative
- “exotic” location, distance in space and time – space for idealization, embellishment, reinvention
- undeniable connection with Britain (long history of conflict and conquest) – potential for developing a national narrative
- reconciliatory approach: accentuating bravery, resilience, honour, fair play (traditionally part of British identity)
- positive attributes associated with heroism
- heroism as an integral part of conflict
- elevation of conflict – higher stakes: heroic ideals, divine involvement (allusions to Odin etc.)



# Sabine Baring-Gould, “The Red Rovers” (1863)

I must tell you that, in the meantime, the Berserkirs had rather wondered at Grettir's disappearance, and from wondering had fallen to suspecting that all was not right. Then they sprang to the door, tried it, and found it locked from without. [...] **The Berserkir rage came on them, and they ground their teeth, frothed at the mouth, and burst forth with the howl of demoniacs** through the office door, upon the landing at the head of the steps, just as Grettir came to the foot.

Thorir and Ögmund were together. **In the fitful gleams of the moon they seemed like fiends**, as they scrambled forth [...], **their eyes glaring with frenzy, and great foam-flakes bespattering their breasts and dropping on the stones at their feet.** The brothers plunged down the narrow stair with a yell which rang through the still snow-clad forest for miles.

Grettir planted the spear in the ground and caught Thorir on its point. The sharp double-edged blade, three feet in length, sliced into him and came out beneath his shoulders, then tore into Ögmund's breast a span deep. [...] The **wretched men** crashed to the bottom of the stair, tried to rise, staggered, and fell again. Grettir planted his foot on them, and wrenched the blade from their wounds, drew the cutlass and smote down another rover as he broke through the door. Other Berserkirs poured out, and Grettir drove at them with spear, or hewed at them with sword [...].

The pirates showed desperate fight [...]. They warded off Grettir's blows, and fled from corner to corner, pursued by their indefatigable foe. [...] Grettir followed into the gloom, and smote right and left. The **bewildered wretches** climbed into the boat, some strove to push her into the water, whilst others battled in the darkness with their unseen enemy [...].

[...]

**Grettir [...] chased the poor wretches like rats** from corner to corner, till he had cut them both down. Then he pulled the corpses to the door and cast them outside.

(p. 17-18)

# Reflections

- adventurous, sensational retelling of a scene from *Grettis saga*
- conflict and violence as an exciting spectacle
- Grettir portrayed as nearly invincible, “indefatigable” (tireless)
- Grettir’s foes, the berserks – unhuman as a threat, harmless when overpowered; “fiends”, “demoniacs”, “wretched men”, “bewildered wretches”, “rats”, “poor wretches”



# H. R. Haggard, *Eric Brighteyes* (1890)

Now when men saw that Ospakar once more held [the sword] Whitefire in his hand – Whitefire that Brighteyes had won from him – they called aloud that it was an omen. The sword of Blacktooth had come back to Blacktooth and now Eric would surely be slain of it!

Eric sprang from the ground. He heard the shouts and saw Whitefire blazing in Ospakar's hand.

‘Now thou art weaponless, fly! Brighteyes; fly!’ cried some.

Gudruda's cheek grew white with fear, and for a moment Eric's heart failed him.

‘Fly not!’ roared Skallagrim. ‘Björn tripped thee. Yet hast thou half a shield!’

Ospakar rushed on, and Whitefire flickered over Eric's helm. Down it came and shored one wing from the helm. Again it shone and fell, but Brighteyes caught the blow on his broken shield.

Then, while men waited to see him slain, Eric gave a great war-shout and sprang forward.

‘Thou art mad!’ shouted the folk.

‘Ye shall see! Ye shall see!’ screamed Skallagrim.

Again Ospakar smote, and again Eric caught the blow; and behold! he struck back, thrusting with the point of the shorn shield straight at the face of Ospakar.

[...]

Once more Whitefire shone above him. Eric rushed in beneath the sword, and with all his mighty strength thrust the buckler-point at Blacktooth's face. It struck fair and full, and lo! the helm of Ospakar burst asunder. He threw wide his giant arms, then fell as a pine falls upon the mountain edge. He fell back, and he lay still.

But Eric, stooping over him, took Whitefire from his hand.

(p. 232)

# Reflections

We first find the idea that “fair play” is a particularly English, or British, trait in Daniel Defoe’s writings. This association with being British often goes hand in hand with the idea that the common people in particular live by a code of fair play (in which **enjoyment of the spectacle of others fighting was usually an important component**).

Jonathan Duke-Evans, *An English Tradition?* (2023)

- highly dramatic, tense description
- Eric as the ultimate hero – unfairly tripped during combat, keeps his honour, wins back his sword from his rival (Ospakar)
- watched by his love interest (Gudruda), cheered on by his loyal companion (Skallagrim)
- Eric finally stabbing Ospakar’s face portrayed in positive, heroic terms – “struck fair and full”
- Ospakar depicted as a troll/giant rather than human: “threw wide his giant arms”, “fell as a pine falls upon the mountain edge”



# William Morris, *The Story of Sigurd the Volsung and the Fall of the Niblungs* (1876)

“Ye shall know my will,” said Atli, “ye shall do it, or do no more  
The deeds of the days of the living: **ye shall render the garnered store,  
Ye shall give forth the Gold of Sigurd**, the wealth of the uttermost strand.”

[...]

“O King of the East,” said Gunnar, “great gifts for thee draw nigh,  
But **the treasure of the Niblungs in their guarded house shall lie.**”

[...]

Said Atli: “Yet may ye live in the wholesome light of the sun,  
And your latter days be as plenteous as the deeds your hands have done.”  
“**Dost thou hearken, O sword,**” said Gunnar, “**and yet thou liest in peace?**  
**When wilt thou look on the daylight, that the words of the mocker may cease?**”

“Thou, Hogni the wise,” said Atli, “**art thou weary of wisdom and lore,**  
**Wilt thou die with these fools of the sword**, and be mocked mid the blind of the war?”

“Many things have I learned,” said Hogni, “but today’s task, easy it is;  
For men die every hour and they wage no master for this.

- **Get hence, thou evil King, thou liar and traitor of kings,  
Lest the edge of my sword be thy portion and not the ruddy rings!”**

[...]

Then it was to the Niblung warriors as their very hearts they heard  
Cry out, not glad nor sorry, nor hoping, nor afeard,  
But touched by the hand of Odin, smit with foretaste of the day,  
When the fire shall burn up fooling, and the veil shall fall away;

[...]

# Reflections

- elevation of conflict: mythological, divine connotations
- fatedness of conflict, characters' premonition – “foretaste of the day”
- “touched by the hand of Odin” – connection with the divine
- recreating the “spirit” of the Old North – portraying the mythological past
- language and style – alliteration, kennings, words of Germanic origin



# Conclusion: Old Norse conflict in Victorian Literature

- general underlying tendency: exaggeration, idealization, elevation
- close connection between conflict and heroism (heroic potential)
- implied positive attributes – ideals suitable for the British national(ist)/imperial(ist) narrative
- distance in space and time – background and potential for exoticism, idealization, and reinvention of the Vikings for Victorian Britain

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